



## Sidetracked

### PACK MENTALITY: Gear

# “I Was Only Going a Mile”

Text: Bill Drago  
Photography: Teri Conrad

We see it all the time. A pretty young lady riding across campus on a scooter, a bare-headed youth ripping through rush-hour traffic on a sportbike, T-shirt billowing over bare skin, or a middle-aged man, commuting to work on his cruiser. They are dressed for the gym, work, or leisure ... but too often, not for the ride.

**D**ing. The bell rings, announcing another customer entering Palace Auto Supply. A man shuffles in, aluminum crutches clamped to his forearms, clanking against the metal door frame. He struggles toward the parts counter and I look away, trying to be respectful.

“Hi Bill.” I turn toward him, suddenly recognizing his face. We worked together a couple years back.

“Hi, Mark—what happened to you?”

“I wrecked my motorcycle, hit my head.”

“Let me guess, no helmet?”

What prompts otherwise reasonable people to ride without helmets and other protective gear when its ability to save lives and reduce injury is so overwhelmingly evident? We hear many arguments for the practice, but peer pressure is no doubt a significant factor, despite riders’ claims about individuality. Research studies have linked conformity to group norms with a lack of helmet use. Other clothing choices follow suit.

The All-The-Gear-All-The-Time (ATGATT) philosophy acknowledges that there is no good time—or distance—to ride without protective gear. During one of my MSF Basic Rider Courses, a student asked, “Aren’t Levis good enough?”

My response: “Who can tell me about their next crash? When will it happen and what will it be like?”

Receiving only blank looks, I continued. “When you can answer those questions, I’ll tell you what you should wear, but here are some things to consider: Denim grinds away in about six to 12 feet. Knees and hips blow through almost instantly.”

The art of self-deception is something we humans are good at, in no small part due to the culture around us. When we see others riding

without protection, it’s easy to forget how vulnerable we are. We may justify forgoing the helmet, jacket, and boots because of weather, perceived comfort, locale, or style.

Instead of being cavalier, we can be proactive and make the ATGATT choice—a commitment to wear protective gear all the time, like buckling our seat belt in an automobile. Once this decision is made, it is good to become educated on your options.

In addition to a DOT-approved helmet, riders should wear boots and a layer of protection against the elements and any potential impact. Next to leather, which is hot in summer, forms of nylon like DuPont’s Cordura offer the best skid protection. Textiles made with nylon offer year-round comfort by either being porous or water- and wind-proof when matched with materials such as GORE-TEX. Cheaper garments may use polyester, which has a lower melting point than nylon and gives way quickly in a skid, but could be equipped with armor in strike points, offering more safety than street clothes.

The European “CE” rating for armor means it has been tested and approved by European motorcycle safety standards, much like our own DOT and the more stringent Snell helmet certification. CE-approved armor comes in many sub-grades, but even the least of these is head and shoulders above the cheap padding or open cell foam used in budget-priced jackets and pants. D3O, a CE-rated armor, is also “strain sensitive,” meaning the cells firm up on impact but are otherwise pliable. Yes, the best protection is more costly, but as the old Bell helmet ad said, “If you’ve got a ten dollar head, buy a ten dollar helmet.” The same goes for the rest of your equipment.

Research before you buy, and get a fit and style you’ll wear. Don’t let the culture of the pack dictate a reduced level of protection. Remember the cartoon showing “Cool Gear” vs. “Fool’s Gear,” which is, of course, the gear you didn’t wear.

“...Yea. I was only going a mile, and most of my friends don’t even wear helmets. It was a nice day and I left mine on my desk. I was just going about 30 mph when a truck cut me off. I tagged the rear bumper and my head hit the pavement. I barely got a scratch, but it messed up my motor skills. I’ll never be the same.”

“Man, I’m sorry, Mark.”

“Thanks, yea, it’s OK. I was stupid. If only I could go back to that day...” **RR**